



T O

Alexander Scrymgeour

of Tealing, Esquire,

This SERMON,

As a Testimony of Gratitude and
Respect,

Is Dedicated by

His much obliged, and

most humble Servant,

JOHN STEWART.

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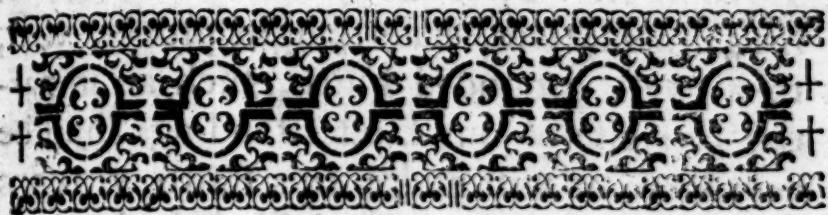
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A
S E R M O N
O N

LUKE xi. 35. *Take heed therefore, that the Light which is in thee be not Darkness.*



HO' the Evidence for the Truth of our holy Religion is sufficient to satisfy any reasonable and unprejudiced Enquirer, it is not of such an overbearing Nature, as irresistibly to force Men into the Belief of it. The Way to discern the Excellency of the Christian Revelation, and to have a just Notion of the particular Doctrines it contains, is to have a sincere Desire to find out the Truth, and to be willing to receive it in the
Love

Love of it. Thus God, in the Wisdom of his Dispensations, has thought proper, that, to a well grounded Faith, such an impartial Exercise of our Understandings shall be necessary, as will make this Faith virtuous and commendable. Tho' Christianity was confirmed by the greatest and most unquestionable Miracles, even these Miracles did not perswade such as were Eye-witnesses of them, while their Minds were blinded by unreasonable Prejudices and vicious Lusts.

A remarkable Instance we have of this, in the preceeding Part of the Chapter. Our Saviour had wrought a Miracle in casting out a Devil, which raised the Wonder and Admiration of the Multitude: But the *Pharisees*, who were resolved not to be convinced, maliciously suggested, It was not by the Power of God, but by a Confederacy with the Prince of Devils he did cast out Devils. And others, tho' they had not arrived at such a Height of Impiety, yet, tempting him, they asked a Sign from Heaven, a Sign of a more extraordinary and astonishing Nature, to demonstrate beyond contradiction his divine Mission; as if the Excellency of his Doctrine, and the Miracles already wrought, had left the Case doubtful, whether he was a Teacher sent from God, or not.

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The Son of God having shewn, with the greatest Force of Argument, how extravagantly absurd it was, to ascribe these Miracles to the Power of the Devil, which were wrought in a direct Opposition to his Interests, and tended to destroy the Dominion he had usurped over the Souls and the Bodies of Men, he assigns the true Reason why that perverse Generation was not convinced, by a Degree of Evidence which would have been more than sufficient to have convinced severals who lived in the past Ages of the World. The Reason he gives, is this, They had not the Dispositions necessary, to consider this Evidence impartially, and to yield unto the Force of it.

This he illustrates by a just and beautiful Similitude, *Ver. 34. The Light of the Body is the Eye: Therefore, when thine Eye is single, thy whole Body also is full of Light: But, when thine Eye is evil, thy Body also is full of Darknes.*

As the Eye directs the Body, so the Understanding is, or ought to be the leading Faculty of the Mind. If our Eyes are dis-tempered, and rendred unfit for their proper Office, our Bodies must be ill guided in their Motions. In like Manner, if our Understandings are blinded, this will betray us into the most fatal Mistakes.

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By Means of Prejudices and Passions, Men may entrench themselves within such thick Darkness, as the strongest external Evidence will not be able to penetrate. *Take heed therefore,* says our Saviour, *that the Light which is in thee be not Darkness.* As if he had said,

It is of the utmost Consequence, that you avoid, as much as possible, the making of false Judgments, especially in Matters of Religion. Divest yourselves therefore, of all these Prejudices and Passions that may shut out the Entrance of Light into your Minds; be careful to maintain proper Dispositions for discerning the Truth; consider Things fairly and impartially, and make a right Use of the Means of Information which God has given you. If you neglect to do these Things, you will grossly impose upon yourselves; and though Truth is, in its own Nature, fixed and invariable, and as distinct from Falshood as Light is from Darkness, yet the Light that is in you is no better than Darkness.

Here then we have a Caution given us by our divine Teacher, and that with such Solemnity, as loudly proclaims the Importance of it; and, at the same Time, we have a Warning given us of the bad Effects that will

will follow upon neglecting it. *The Light that is in us will be Darkness.*

As these are the principal Purposes in the Words, I shall, through the Assistance of the Father of Lights, *First*, Take Notice of some Things implied in our Saviour's Exhortation.

II. Point out some of the bad Consequences that have followed, or may follow upon not observing it.

III. Adventure to put you in Remembrance of some Things, to serve as Directions in this Matter.

I am to shew what is imply'd in our Saviour's Exhortation. And *First*,

The Solemnity with which it is delivered plainly shews, that a just Knowledge of Religion is of the greatest Moment and Consequence. This is a Truth so evident, that it would be needless to spend Time in the Proof of it. Religion informs us how we may be delivered from the Guilt and from the Power of our Sins, and may be restored to the glorious Liberty of the Sons and Children of God. The Design of it is, to excite in us Affections which are most reasonable in themselves, will render us useful and agreeable to others, and qualify us for the eternal Enjoyment of God in another World. It affords strong Consolation under all the Evils

of Life, and the Fears of Death, and gives us the glorious Prospect of a blessed Immortality. Of so great Importance is it, that our Saviour calls it, *The one Thing needful*. And *John xvii. 3. This is Life eternal, to know thee the only true God, and thy Son Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent*. So great a Value did the Apostle put upon it, that he counted all Things but Loss for the Excellency of the Knowledge of Jesus Christ. *Phil. iii. 8.*

2dly, This Exhortation, *Take heed that the Light which is in thee be not Darkness*, evidently implies, that in Matters of Religion we must judge for ourselves, and make use of our own Understandings for the Discovery of Truth.

Religion supposes we are reasonable Creatures, and are capable of distinguishing between Truth and Falshood. Now, before we can assent to any Thing as true, we must have Proofs or Arguments that will make it appear to be so. To believe without Evidence, is to give the Lie to our Understandings, and is quite as absurd as if we should pretend to see in the Dark.

Whenever God, out of his infinite Wisdom and Goodness, has thought fit to reveal his Will to Mankind, we may be assured he has sent such Credentials along with it,

as, to every one that is attentive, will distinguish it from the most artful Impostures, and make it highly reasonable to acknowledge him for the Author of it. Upon such Proofs are we to believe Christianity; and to believe it without Regard to these, is to dishonour it. It is to receive it upon Principles that would equally lead us to receive a Lie. But our Saviour is so far from requiring a rash and ill grounded Faith, that he appeals to the Understandings of Men, concerning the Proofs he gave of his divine Mission, *Luke xii. 57. Why of your selves judge ye not what is right?* Here he commands us to *take heed that the Light which is in us be not Darkness.* And, to the same Purpose, we have many Exhortations in the holy Scriptures, as *1 Thess. v. 21. Prove all Things, hold fast that which is good.* And *1 Peter iii. 15. Be ready to give to every one that asketh, a Reason of the Hope that is in you.* And *1 John iv. 1. Beloved, believe not every Spirit, but try the Spirits, whether they are of God; for many false Prophets have gone out into the World.* Here the Apostle gives the strongest Reason imaginable why we must judge for ourselves. The various and contradictory Pretences to Truth, make it absolutely necessary to examine which of these Pretences are best founded.

founded. Thus did Christianity at first make its Way into the World, and triumph over the false Religions that formerly prevailed in it, and this is the only solid Foundation upon which it can be supported.

This general Principle is so undeniably evident, that it is own'd by Christians of all Denominations. Even the Church of *Rome*, who would have Men to judge as little as possible for themselves, must allow them to examine the Arguments whereby they would establish their Claim to Infallibility: So that, even according to them, Religion is at last founded in the Right of private Judgment.

3dly. The Caution in the Text implies, that Men are in Hazard of falling into great Mistakes in Religion; *the Light that is in them may be Darkness.*

Many Reasons may be assigned for this Truth, which is but too manifest from the History of all Ages. Sloth and Carelessness keeps a great Part of Mankind in Ignorance, and makes them implicitly follow the Opinions, just as they do the Customs of the Place they live in.— Others are presumptuously ignorant; they have such a Conceit of their own Knowledge and Sufficiency, that to attempt to undeceive them is to affront them; and, if they can, they will

will be sure to make you feel their Resentment.—— Vicious Lusts and Passions cause Men hate the Truth; *They love Darkness rather than Light, because their Deeds are evil.* This provokes God to give them up to a *reprobate Mind.* *Because they received not the Love of the Truth, for this Cause God shall send them strong Delusion, that they should believe a Lie.*—— Worldly Interest lays a great Bias on the Mind; when we wish any Opinion to be true, we are, upon very slender Grounds, induced to believe it is so.—— As, on the one Hand, some out of a Vanity of distinguishing themselves, are betrayed into singular Opinions; so, on the other Hand, an undue Reverence for human Authority strangely narrows the Mind, awes it with base Fears, and sinks it into a State of mean Slavery.—— Popular Prejudices and Opinions always have zealous Defenders; many find their Account in espousing them. This is a cheap Way of purchasing Reputation, and often supplies the Place of useful Knowledge, and of real Merit. This has caused Men stifle the Convictions of their Consciences, and dissemble the most important Truths. We are told, *John xii. 43. That of the Rulers many believed in Jesus Christ; but they would not confess him, lest they should be put out of*

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of the Synagogue; for they loved the Praise of Men more than the Praise of God. And, says our Saviour, *John v. 44. How can ye believe, that seek Honour one of another, and not that Honour that cometh from God only?* Yea, even tho', in a considerable Measure, we divest ourselves of Prejudices, and attempt to find out the Truth, there is a certain Levity and Forwardness in human Nature, which is apt to make us superficial in our Enquiries, and precipitant in our Judgments. When we reflect upon the present State of Mankind, may we not use the Words which the Psalmist does upon another Occasion, *Who can understand his Errors?* Yet we must beware of ascribing these Errors to any Defect in the Revelation God has given us; but to wilful Obstinacy, or Want of Attention. The clearest Light will not cause Men see, if they shut their Eyes, or turn them away from it.

4thly, It is implied in this Exhortation, That the Way to prevent these Mistakes in Religion, is to be sincere and impartial in our Enquiries after Truth. The Method prescribed by our Saviour, is, **TO TAKE HEED**, and who can pretend to find out a better? I have already shewn, we ought to be satisfied about the Grounds of our Religion. Now, I say further, We must judge for ourselves
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of the Meaning of that Revelation God has been graciously pleased to give us. Indeed the Church of *Rome* would gladly ease us of this Trouble. They assure us, if we will be guided by them, they will secure us from all Error and Mistake, about the Interpretation of Scripture. But, as the Scripture is wholly silent about this infallible Guide, and as many of the Doctrines and Practices of that Church are directly contrary to the Gospel, we do not think it adviseable to resign our Understandings to their Direction; and we look upon their Claim to Infallibility, as an Artifice to enslave the Consciences of Men, and to make them the Property of artful and designing Priests. We are resolved to see with our own Eyes, and to make Use of the Right that belongs to us as Christians, of enquiring for ourselves. Our Saviour has commanded us to *search the Scriptures*, *John* v. 39. And this Command, as well as the Exhortation in the Text, is addressed to all his Hearers, without Distinction, Learned and Unlearned. We do not find it excused the common People among the *Jews* for not believing in Jesus Christ, that their Spiritual Guides, the *Pharisees*, rejected him. But we find our Saviour gives a Warning, which one would think might have hindered any

any who pretend to the Character of his Disciples, from making such impious and extravagant Claims. *Matth. xxiii. 8, 9, 10. Be ye not called Rabbi, for one is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are Brethren. And call no Man your Father upon the Earth, for one is your Father which is in Heaven: Neither be ye called Masters, for one is your Master, even Christ.* Upon this Principle did the Protestants separate from the Church of *Rome*; and if any Protestant denies it, either he does not understand, or he basely betrays the Foundation of our Reformation.

This Protestant Principle is well expressed in our *Confession of Faith*, Chap. xx. Par. 2. "God alone is Lord of the Con-
 " science, and has left it free from the Do-
 " ctrines and Commandments of Men, which
 " are in any Thing contrary to his Word,
 " or beside it in Matters of Faith or Wor-
 " ship; so that, to believe such Doctrines,
 " or obey such Commandments, is to betray
 " Liberty of Conscience. And to require
 " implicate Faith, and an absolute and blind
 " Obedience, is to destroy Liberty of Con-
 " science, and Reason also." Thus far our
Confession of Faith. But we are not to
 think this Doctrine supersedes the Useful-
 ness and Necessity of Teachers in Religion.

One may use a Guide, tho' he does not shut his own Eyes, or so tamely submit to Directions as to walk blindfold, if his Guide should advise him to it.

5thly, This Exhortation further implies, That if *we do take heed, the Light that is in us shall not be Darknēss*; i. e. If we are sincere in our Enquiries after Truth, we shall be preserved from all Errors of fatal Consequence. Truth finds easy Access to a well disposed Mind, and there it is to be hoped it will be victorious and triumphant: And such is the Nature of the great Truths of Religion, that they do not so much require a quick Understanding, as an honest Heart. In Matters of less Consequence, the best disposed Persons may be mistaken. Absolute Security from Error is not to be expected in this Life; nor does the Goodness of God make this more necessary than that we should be placed beyond all Hazard of Sin. But the Goodness of God, and the Design of a Revelation, require, that Truths of Importance should be obvious to Mens Capacities, and that such as are sincere should be preserved from damnable Mistakes. If this were not the Case, we would be thrown into a State of most miserable Perplexity; for, in many Instances, we cannot be infallibly sure we are in the Right: The

utmost we can attain to, is to be satisfied about our Sincerity. Blessed be God, we are under a Covenant of Grace, and may be assured, that, as God, through the Merits of Jesus Christ, will pardon the Imperfections of our Obedience, consistent with Sincerity, he will, in like Manner, forgive the Errors of our Understanding, which do not proceed from gross Carelessness, or perverse Obstinacy. I hope none will so far misunderstand what has been said, as to imagine it derogates from the Necessity of the Influences of God's holy Spirit to enlighten our Understandings, and work a saving Faith in our Minds. No: The Security I speak of, is built upon the promised Assistances of God's Grace. *Psal. xxv. 9. The Meek will he guide in Judgment, and he will clearly teach them his Way.* And *John vii. 17. If any Man will do his Will, he shall know if the Doctrine is of God.*

Neither would I be thought to assert, That every one is qualified to judge in all the nice and intricate Disputes about Religion; but, that every one, with the Use of proper Helps, may know Religion, in as far as is necessary for himself: And, with respect to such Questions as Men have not Capacities to enquire into, they may be safely ignorant, or suspend their Judgment
about

about them. We are not to blame that we have not clearer Eyes, or stronger Understandings; we are only accountable for the Use we make of these Eyes, and of these Understandings God has given us.

As I apprehend what I have said on this Head is founded in Scripture, and agreeable to Reason, so I need only put you in mind, it is likewise agreeable to our *Confession of Faith*, Chap. 1. Par. 7. "All Things in
"Scripture are not alike plain in themselves,
"nor alike clear unto all, yet those Things
"which are necessary to be known, believed
"and observed for Salvation, are so clearly
"propounded and opened in some Place of
"Scripture or other, that not only the Lear-
"ned, but the Unlearned, in a due Use of
"the ordinary Means, may attain unto a
"sufficient Understanding of them."

6thly, It is implied in the Words, That the Neglect of the Rule here prescribed by our Saviour, has proved highly prejudicial to Religion, and produced fatal Effects.

This brings me to the second Thing in the Method, which was,

To point out some of the bad Consequences that have followed, or may follow upon the Neglect of this Rule. And,

How melancholy are the Scenes which the History of the Church, in all Ages, pre-
sents

sents to our View? What Infidelity and Irreligion! What pernicious Errors and Heresies! What a wide Diversity of Opinions, and a yet wider Alienation of Affections has there been among Christians! What Wranglings and Contentions about Words, or Things of no Importance! How great was the Darkeness which overspread the Christian World for some Ages before the Reformation! Idle and ignorant Monks seemed to vie with one another who should broach the greatest Absurdities, and have tied down those who continued in that Church afterwards, to the mean Drudgery of defending their Dreams and Contradictions. Has not, in many Ages, a blind Zeal vented itself in all the Instances of Rage and Fury, of Bloodshed and Destruction? Or, if the Hands of Zealots have been tied up so as they could not persecute and destroy one another, they never failed to have Recourse to the no less unchristian Methods of Calumny and Detraction.

Thus have Christians been biting and devouring one another, weakning their common Cause, and exposing it to the Scorn and Contempt of Infidels.

But, to be more particular, the Neglect of this Rule has been the Cause,

1st. Of

1st. Of INFIDELITY. To this it was owing in the Days of our Saviour, and to the same Cause we must ascribe the Infidelity which, alas! prevails in our own Age. Sure, those who disbelieve the Christian Religion, do not impartially consider the Evidences for the Truth of it; Their Minds are blinded with strong Prejudices, or bad Passions; They form their Opinion of Christianity, not from the Books of Scripture, but from the false Representations made of it by weak or designing Men; They judge of its Doctrines not by their native Tendency, but by the Abuses made of them through Wickedness and Folly: Whereas, we ought to judge of the divine Dispensations by their genuine Tendency, and not by the Perversions of them, otherwise natural Religion behoved to be rejected, for this has also been greatly abused.

But besides this speculative Infidelity, there is another Kind of it far more universal, and which as effectually defeats the Design of the Christian Revelation, that is, A WANT OF TRUE FAITH. The most can be said of a great many who call themselves Christians, is, That they do not disbelieve the Gospel; but it cannot be said they do believe it. They do not reflect upon the Truths of Religion, nor consider the Influence

ence these Truths ought to have upon their Practice; and this Infidelity ruins the Bulk of Mankind.

2dly. This has likewise been the Cause of IMPLICIT FAITH. The Faith of a great many is owing wholly to their Education; they resign their Understandings to the Conduct of those of whom they have conceived a high Opinion: But what can there be commendable in a Faith built only upon the Prejudices of Education? If such Persons are in the Right, it is by a fortunate Accident, and upon the same Principles which would have led them to be Heathens or Mahometans, had they been bred in the Countries where these false Religions prevail.

Can we safely trust to the Direction of those who we think have more Discernment than ourselves? But where is the Set of Men that deserves such an absolute and entire Confidence? How shall we know them, or by what Marks shall we find them out among the many various Pretenders to Truth, who are all of them equally positive that they are in the Right? Besides, this is not the Faith which Christianity requires; we must receive *the Witness of God, which is greater than that of Men.* 1 John v. 9. *Our Faith must not stand in the Wis-*
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dom of Men, but in the Power of God. And I may venture to say, that one who sincerely endeavours to find out the Mind of God, tho' he does fall into Mistakes, is a better Christian than one who is blindly in the Right, out of a slavish Attachment to human Authority.

3dly. The Neglect of this Rule has likewise been the Cause of *Enthusiasm*. By ENTHUSIASM I understand a false and groundless Conceit that Persons may entertain of their being privileged with some extraordinary Illumination, or Impulse of the Spirit of God. Numbers have been under the Power of this Delusion, and have been led not only into the most absurd Opinions, but likewise the most wicked and unrighteous Practices. They have believed and acted according to the Impressions they felt upon their Minds, without any Regard to the Rules of Truth or Justice. Under Pretence of obeying the Will of Heaven, they have trampled upon the Rights of Mankind, and wrought the greatest Confusion upon Earth. Of all Men they are the most unperswadable; to reason with them is lost Labour; they are professed Enemies to it, and fancy they are guided by a much superior Light.

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We know, from the Word of God, that the Spirit operates upon the Minds of Men, to make them good: But this is not by giving them new Revelations; these we have no Ground to expect; but by giving them a saving Knowledge of God's Word, and inclining their Wills to follow it: Whereas, Pretences to NEW REVELATIONS, and OLD TRADITIONS, have done unspeakable Mischief in the World, and have been made use of to shelter the grossest Absurdities.

4^{thly}. SUPERSTITION is another false Light that misleads Men. Such Persons are superstitious who think to please God by doing Things he has not commanded, and have no Tendency to make them wiser or better, but divert them from the Practice of the great and substantial Duties of Religion, as the Penances, Pilgrimages, and other ridiculous Practices countenanced by the Church of *Rome*; which, tho' they have the Appearance of a voluntary Humility, can never be acceptable unto God, because he has not required these Things at their Hands. Or, SUPERSTITION consists in Mens putting the Means of Religion in Place of the End of it. When they imagine, that a strict Regard to outward Observances, and to positive Institutions, will atone for the Neglect of moral Duties, and be accepted
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of, instead of Purity of Heart, and Integrity of Life.

How difficult is it to perswade Men, that Religion requires them to subdue their Lusts, to govern their Passions, and to practise the Virtues of a good Life? They would fain place it in Rites and Ceremonies, or Opinions, that are consistent with wicked and immoral Practices. They would rather give *Thousands of Rams, and Ten thousands of Rivers of Oil*, before they *did Justice, loved Mercy, and walked humbly before God*.

5thly. FALSE ZEAL is another bad Effect that has followed on not observing our Saviour's Rule; and this is either when Men have Zeal without Knowledge, or when they furiously contend for trifling, uncertain and disputable Opinions. This begun to shew itself very early in the Christian Church; therefore the Apostle cautions *Timothy* to beware of *vain Jangling*, to refuse *profane and old Wives Fables*. He charges him, before the Lord, *not to strive about Words to no Profit*, to avoid *foolish and unlearned Questions that gender Strife*. And he tells us, *1 Tim. vi. 3, &c. If any Man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome Words, even the Words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the Doctrine which is*

according to Godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about Questions and Strifes of Words, whereof cometh Envy, Strife, Railings, evil Surmisings, and perverse Disputings of Men of corrupt Minds, and destitute of the Truth. Here we may plainly see, it is the Apostle's Opinion that they are Men of little Understandings, of great Pride, and most perverse Dispositions, who are taken up about these Things. They must endeavour to raise their Reputation by a noisy Zeal for Trifles, because they have not Courage or Capacity to think on Matters of Consequence.

6thly. To this we must also ascribe a Spirit of Persecution. A SPIRIT OF PERSECUTION is a Heat without Light, that, instead of convincing Men, burns and destroys them. It is a Spirit directly contrary to that of the Gospel, and inconsistent with it. Our Saviour severely rebuked this Temper in his Disciples, when they would have been at calling for Fire from Heaven to consume the Samaritans, *Luke ix. 55. Ye know not what Manner of Spirit ye are of; the Son of Man came not to destroy Mens Lives, but to save them.* Says the Apostle, *2 Cor. x. 4. The Weapons of our Warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God, to the pulling down of strong Holds.* James i.

20. *The Wrath of Man worketh not the Righteousness of God. And 2 Tim. ii. 24. The Servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle to all Men, apt to teach, patient, in Meekness instructing those that oppose themselves, if God peradventure will give them Repentance, to the acknowledging of the Truth.*

How monstrous is it to build Religion on the Ruins of Humanity; to turn the peaceable Doctrine of Jesus Christ into a Doctrine of Blood; to think of supporting a *Kingdom that is not of this World*, by Force and Cruelty; to dream of propagating Religion by Methods which serve only to increase Hypocrisy; to dishonour the Truth, by using such Means to advance it as are only necessary for establishing vile Impostures.

Perhaps many will be ready to own it is a great Crime to persecute those who are in the Right, tho' they will affirm it just and reasonable to punish such as reject the Truth, and will not be convinced. But how false and weak is this? when it is evident true Christianity ought not, cannot be supported in this Way. Though the *Samaritans* rejected Jesus Christ, yet he condemned the persecuting Zeal which appeared in his Disciples against them; and who

can say they have greater Certainty, that such as differ from them are in the Wrong, than the Disciples had in this Case? Besides, the Pretence of persecuting those who are Enemies to the Truth, will be made use of by all Parties, and it is high Time they were all ashamed of it. Sure, every one will interpret this Privilege in their own Favours; and he must be very short-sighted, who does not see, that this is the Way to make Persecution universal, and to fill the World with Confusion and Bloodshed.

7thly. To the Neglect of this Rule we must likewise ascribe MYSTICISM. And this is, when Men place Religion in some unintelligible Speculations, or when they neglect the plain and obvious Sense of Scripture, and turn every Thing into Metaphor and Allegory. It must be own'd, this Practice has receiv'd too much Countenance from great and venerable Names. Some of the Fathers have given a boundless Scope to their Fancy in allegorizing the Scriptures, and have sometimes unwarily spoke of the literal Sense with Contempt. This has furnished a late Writer with a Handle for making an impious Attack on the Truth of our Religion, and, under Pretence of finding out a more refined and spiritual Meaning

ing for the Miracles of our Saviour, to deny the Truth and Reality of them.

According to our Confession of Faith, *the Sense of Scripture is not manifold, but one*; whereas, if these mystical Interpretations were allowed, it would have Meanings without Number; or rather, be a Book of the most uncertain Meaning in the World. This mystical Way has no Tendency to enlighten the Understanding; and the Beauty of Christianity has been miserably sullied and defaced by it. It is to give us Husks instead of Bread; or, as one well expressed it, *To feed People with the East-Wind*. Tho' it may work strongly on the Imagination for a little, soon the airy Phantom vanishes, and we are left in Possession of nothing. *As when a hungry Man dreameth, and behold he eateth, but he awaketh, and his Soul is empty; or, as when a thirsty Man dreameth, and behold he drinketh, but he awaketh, and behold he is faint, and his Soul hath Appetite.*

Lastly, To the Neglect of our Saviour's Rule, we must ascribe the SELF-DECEIT that prevails in the World. To this it is owing, that Numbers of Persons entertain so high an Opinion of themselves, and overlook the most plain and express Declarations of Scripture,

ture, whereby they might be enabled to form a true Judgment of their State, with respect to the Favour of God. Nothing is more evident from the Word of God, than, That an external Profession of Religion will avail us nothing, if we do not the Will of our Father who is in Heaven. That the Design of all positive Institutions, as reading and hearing the Word of God, and partaking of the Sacraments, is to excite or strengthen in us holy Dispositions, and to engage us to the Practice of universal Goodness: If they do not promote these Ends, they are useless and insignificant; if they are made Use of to defeat them, and to quiet Mens Consciences in evil Practices, they are highly displeasing to God, and will be rejected by him as vile and detestable Hypocrisy. We are told, That Faith without Works is dead; That only such a Repentance as makes us cease to do Evil, and learn to do well, will be accepted of by God. That tho' we give all our Goods to feed the Poor, and our Bodies to be burned, if we have not Charity, it will profit us nothing. That Malice, Dishonesty, Evil-speaking and Censoriousness, are inconsistent with the Character of a Christian; and, in a Word, that if we go on in the wilful Practice of any known Sin, or the Neglect of any known Duty, we cannot,

not, upon good Grounds, pretend to be among the Followers of Jesus Christ. Yet, notwithstanding of these plain Declarations, how many are there who sooth themselves in their Vices, and imagine they are in a safe Way, while they are most notoriously transgressing the Precepts of the Gospel? How many rely on an outward Profession, a dead and inefficacious Faith, or a false and unprofitable Repentance? Yea, it is possible such Persons may be so far deluded, as, like the *Pharisees*, to trust in themselves that they are righteous, and despise others. They may say unto others, with the sullen Pride of conceited Hypocrites, *Stand by thyself, come not near to me, for I am holier than thou.* *Isaiah* lxxv. 5.

I now proceed, in the *third Place*, to put you in Remembrance of some Things that may serve as Directions, and these I need only name. And,

1st. We must be very careful to understand the Grounds of our Religion. This is to lay a firm Foundation for our Faith, that will make it stand unshaken against all Assaults and Impressions.

2^{dly}, We must be diligent in searching the Scriptures, and from them we must form our Judgment of particular Doctrines, that we may receive these Doctrines, not as
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the *Word of Men*, but as the *Word of God*.

In order to understand the Passages of Scripture, we must attend to the Design, Order and Connexion of them, and not crumble the Scripture into Pieces, by looking on the Texts as so many incoherent Sentences, which have no Relation to one another, otherwise we may be well versed in SCRIPTURE-PHRASES, and know very little of SCRIPTURE-SENSE.

3dly, Let us always keep in View the practical Tendency of all the Parts of our Religion. All the Mysteries of our Religion are Mysteries of Godliness, *i. e.* powerful and efficacious Motives to a holy Life; and the most sublime Doctrines, if they are not improved to lead Men to Holiness, are taken quite off the Scheme of the Gospel; the Design of which was to teach Men to *deny Ungodliness and worldly Lusts, and to live soberly, righteously and godly in a present World*. Says the Apostle, *Titus* iii. 8. *This is a faithful Saying, and these Things I will that thou affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God, be careful to maintain good Works: These Things are good and profitable unto Men.*

4thly, Let us retain a becoming Sense of the Imperfection of our Faculties. This will

will dispose us to receive every Doctrine we can discover to be contained in the Word of God, tho' it far exceed our Comprehension; and, at the same Time, it will incline us to think charitably of those who differ from us.

In all our Controversies about Religion, we must be careful to have a determinate Meaning to the Words we make Use of, otherwise they are but Scuffles in the Dark, and commonly end in reproachful Names.

5thly, Let us beware of drawing uncharitable Conclusions, especially from disputable Principles; we all know, of late it has been maintained with great Zeal, that an *uninterrupted Succession* of Bishops from the Days of the Apostles, is essentially necessary to the Constitution of a Christian Church; that such as have not this, are without the Church, without the Sacraments; and, as some of them are modestly pleased to say, *without immortal Souls*. Can we think God will make our Salvation depend on any Thing which it is impossible for any reasonable Man to be satisfied about? Doubtless we must think them mighty well employed in tracing a Succession of Christian Bishops through a Church which we believe to be Antichristian. What a Pity is it they should undertake this arduous Labour, with no better a

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Design, than to damn every one who cannot pretend to be so *learned Genealogists* as themselves? I wish I could say, there were none among our selves, who stretch some disputable Points about Church Government to very near as extravagant a Height; Points which, for all the Noise and Glamour they have raised about them, this Church has always reckon'd in the Number of those Things which, as our *Confession of Faith* expresses it, *are to be ordered by the Light of Nature and Christian Prudence, according to the general Rules of the Word*, as is evident from the different Rules they have enacted for their Procedure in these Cases.

Lastly, Let us earnestly beg the Illumination of God's holy Spirit to lead us into all necessary Truth; let us ask Wisdom of God, who giveth liberally to all, and upbraideth none.

Thus I have taken Notice of a few of the many Things that might be said upon this copious Subject; and, lest I trespass too far upon your Time and Patience, I shall bring this Discourse to a Conclusion.

I hope we are all agreed it is the Duty of every one, to *take heed that the Light which is in him be not Darkness*; and that this is, in a particular Manner, incumbent on the Ministers of the Gospel,
who

who are employed in teaching others: For, as our Saviour informs us, *If the Blind do lead the Blind, both must fall into the Ditch.*

We are bound, by our Office, to instruct Men in the Knowledge of a Religion, which, by the most solid Arguments, may be shewn to be of a divine Original. In the whole Frame and Contexture of it, it is calculated for giving us great and honourable Thoughts of God, and for promoting the Happiness of Men---. It has the Attestation of a long Series of Prophecies, which we believe to have received their full Accomplishment in Jesus Christ---. Our Saviour wrought many great and beneficial Miracles, and empowered others to do so in his Name. And, for the Truth of these Miracles, and the other Facts recorded in the Gospel History, we have the Testimony of Witnesses, whose Knowledge and Veracity are placed beyond any just Ground of Exception---. Our Religion was not propogated by Violence; on the other Hand, it was opposed and persecuted, as being contrary to the deeply rooted Prejudices, both of *Jews* and *Gentiles*, and inconsistent with the Views and Passions of worldly Men, yet it made the most amazing Progress: *The Word of God mightily grew, and prevailed.* These

are some of the Arguments whereby the Divinity of our Religion may be evinced; but it requires Care and Attention to perceive the Force of them, and to be able to represent them distinctly to others. What a scandalous Reproach would it be on those who are *set for the Defence of the Gospel*, if they were ignorant, or had but confused and superficial Notions of the very Foundations of it?

The Scriptures reveal the Doctrines of natural Religion concerning the Perfections and Providence of God, and his moral Government of the World, clear of all Superstition, and in a Way accomodated to the Capacities of the Bulk of Mankind. Besides, they discover Truths of the utmost Importance, that could not be known by the Light of Reason, as, the Way in which guilty Sinners may obtain the Remission of their Sins, on account of the meritorious Sacrifice which Jesus Christ has offered unto God, and how we may be delivered from the Dominion of Sin by the Grace of the holy Spirit, be made Partakers of a divine Nature, and qualified for the Glory and Immortality brought to Light by the Gospel. These Doctrines we must represent as they are contained in the Word of God, shew the practical Influence of them, and par-

particularly instruct Christians in the Regards due to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, on account of the Characters they sustain in the Work of our Redemption.

Our Religion contains a complete System of the most refined Morality, founds it on the most generous and steady Principles, enforces it by the most powerful Motives, and recommends it from the bright and amiable Example of our Lord and Master. These Duties are every where declared to be of the utmost Importance, and without the Practice of them, that all Pretences to Religion are false and hollow. We must therefore endeavour to explain them distinctly, and enforce them with proper Motives, especially such as are peculiar to the Gospel. This is highly necessary to detect the Deceitfulness of Mens Hearts, who are wonderfully ingenious in contriving Shifts and Evasions to elude the Performance of moral Duties, who are ready to take up with a *Form of Godliness*, while they are *disobedient, and to every good Work reprobate*.

To handle these Subjects in a Way suited to their Dignity and Importance, is a Matter of no small Difficulty. It requires Thought and Application, quite of another Kind than it does to trifle with Metaphors, or perpetually to insist on a few of the Doctrines

trines of Christianity, to the Neglect or Disregard of the other Parts of it.

Another Part of our Office is, to put up publick Prayers to God in the Congregations of his People; and surely, this ought to be done with great Reverence and Caution. We must beware of that disrespectful Familiarity, which some conceited and forward Enthusiasts have used in their Addresses to God, who give a Loose to their wild and irregular Imaginations, and approach unto him in a Manner altogether unsuitable to the infinite Distance at which he is placed above us. We must avoid the vain Repetitions our Saviour blames in the *Pharisees*, and condemns as useless. And let us not narrow the Terms of Christian Communion, by mixing our little doubtful Opinions with our Prayers. This cannot but give great Offence to many good Christians, when they observe one of the most solemn Duties of Religion prostituted to serve the Purposes of Anger, of Uncharitableness, and of Party Zeal. *Eccles. v. 2. Be not rash with thy Mouth, and let not thine Heart be hasty to utter any Thing before God: For God is in Heaven, and thou upon Earth, therefore let thy Words be few.*

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When we are met in Judicatures, our Debates ought to be managed with Decency and Moderation. An intire Uniformity of Opinion is not to be expected. Our Understandings are not all of the same Size, nor can Things appear to all of us in the same Point of Light. But this, of itself, would produce no bad Consequences, if we would avoid angry Contentions, and uncharitable Reflections.

By observing these Things, we will promote the Glory of God, and the Happiness of Men, and may hope, through God's Blessing, *to turn many that are disobedient to the Wisdom of the Just.* We will procure the Esteem due to the Dignity of our Character, and most certainly will have the Approbation of God, and of our own Consciences.

But if any shall claim Dominion over the Faith of others, and tho' in Words they own themselves fallible, yet be as imperious, and as impatient of Contradiction, as if they could not be mistaken; If they shew a great Propensity to entertain odious Opinions of those who differ from them, and watch their Conduct with the evil Eye of jealous Inquisitors; If, instead of representing the Truths of the Gospel in their native and amiable Simplicity, they darken plain Truths

Truths with strained Metaphors, absurd Allegories, ill chosen Similitudes, and a Multitude of Words, without any determinate Meaning; If, instead of inculcating the great Duties of Religion, they fill Peoples Heads *with Questions that minister Strife, to the subverting of the Hearers*, and inflame them with a Spirit of Discord, of Faction, of Censoriousness and Uncharitableness, such Persons do manifestly pervert the Ends of their Function; their Conduct has a Tendency, either to produce Infidelity or implicit Faith; and, however they may raise the Admiration of the Weak and Ignorant, they will, most certainly, incur the Contempt of those of better Understanding.

I hope the PEOPLE will own it is dealing fairly with them, when we tell them they have an unquestionable Right to judge for themselves; that we do not pretend to have Dominion over their Faith, but to be Helpers of their Joy: And is it not reasonable they should allow us the same Privilege, and that we may have the Liberty of acting according to our own Judgment, without incurring their HOT DISPLEASURE.

I would earnestly recommend the Practice of the great Duties of Religion; this would improve your Knowledge, and help
you

you to make a much truer Judgment than can be attained to by mere Speculation : Even as in common Life Men of Experience are more skilful Judges in Business than visionary Projectors, or those who deal only in Theory. Were we careful to practise the Duties of Religion, this would enlarge our Hearts, and soon convince us of the Vanity of these empty Notions that fill the Heads of so many.

Another Thing I would recommend to the People, is, That they would at least give a Hearing to any Thing may be said, even in Opposition to their present Sentiments. Notice the Behaviour of the *Bereans*, for which they are so highly commended *Acts* xvii. 11. even before they could consider the Apostle *Paul* in the Character of an Apostle, they gave him a patient Hearing, and searched the Scriptures, if these Things were so or not. Whereas, had they been of the Humour that prevails among some, either they would have kept themselves out of the Way, or, with great Indecency, they would have run out of the Synagogue.

*I pray God may bless all of us with
a Spirit of Love, of Peace, and
of a sound Mind. May God, who
commanded Light to shine out of
Darkness, shine into our Hearts,
to give us the Light of the Know-
ledge of the Glory of God, in the
Face of Jesus Christ.*

T H E E N D.

